Nafs al-Muṭma’innah, Anattā, and Bhakti: A Textual–Anthropological Study of Ego-Transcendence in the Qur’an, Pāli Canon, and Sanskrit Scripture

Jayanantaka

Across the world’s major religious traditions, sacred texts repeatedly return to one central human problem: the unrest of the ego. While doctrines, cosmologies, and theological languages differ, a striking convergence appears at the level of lived spiritual experience. Islam articulates this culmination through the concept of *nafs al-muṭma’innah*, Buddhism through the doctrine of *anattā*, and Hinduism—particularly within the bhakti tradition—through the total surrender of the self to the divine. This article approaches these concepts not as doctrinal equivalents, but as **parallel anthropological expressions of ego-transcendence**, as preserved in authoritative texts.

Rather than seeking theological unification, this study adopts a phenomenological and anthropological reading of scripture, asking how different traditions textualize the transformation of human consciousness when the ego no longer functions as the center of experience.

In the Qur’an, the most condensed and evocative depiction of spiritual consummation appears in Sūrat al-Fajr. God addresses the human soul directly:

“O tranquil soul, return to your Lord, well-pleased and pleasing. Enter among My servants, and enter My Garden.”
(Qur’an 89:27–30)

The subject of this address is not “the believer” (*al-mu’min*), nor “those who have performed righteous deeds,” but the *soul* (*nafs*). The adjective *muṭma’innah* derives from the root ṭ-m-n, denoting stability, calmness, and the absence of inner turbulence. This tranquility does not signify the absence of trials, but the absence of resistance. The soul no longer contests reality through egoic insistence.

The phrase *“return to your Lord”* does not describe coercion or judgment, but an ontological readiness. This return is characterized by *rāḍiyatan marḍiyyah*—a mutual state of contentment between the soul and God. Anthropologically, this marks the dissolution of the ego’s oppositional stance. Desire no longer negotiates; will no longer resists.

The next injunction, *“enter among My servants”*, employs the possessive *‘ibādī*, a term the Qur’an reserves for those beyond satanic domination: *“Indeed, over My servants you have no authority”* (Qur’an 15:42). To be an *‘abd* here is not merely to obey, but to exist without egoic claim. Agency is not erased but harmonized.

The culmination is *“enter My Garden”* (*jannatī*). Linguistically, this expression is exceptional. The Qur’an most often speaks of *jannāt* (gardens, plural), described in rich sensory detail—rivers, fruits, companions, pleasures. Here, however, *jannah* appears in the singular and is directly attributed to God. No physical description follows. From an anthropological perspective, such textual silence is meaningful. What is being described is not a reward-space, but a **state of proximity**, a relational mode of being rather than a material environment.

This reading gains further clarity when placed beside the Buddhist textual tradition preserved in Pāli. In the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* (Saṃyutta Nikāya 22.59), the Buddha systematically dismantles the notion of a permanent self. The refrain,

“Etaṃ mama, eso’ham asmi, eso me attā”
(“This is mine, this I am, this is my self”),

is examined and rejected in relation to all components of human experience. Suffering is traced not to existence itself, but to the egoic appropriation of experience. When this appropriation ceases, liberation occurs.

The Buddhist canon describes the culmination of this process as *nibbāna*, which the *Dhammapada* calls *"the highest happiness"* (*nibbānaṃ paramaṃ sukhaṃ*, Dhp. 203). Yet nirvana is not portrayed as a place, nor as a collection of pleasures. It is defined negatively—as the cessation of craving (*taṇhā*) and clinging. Phenomenologically, this condition mirrors *nafs al-muṭma'innah*: both signify the end of inner agitation produced by the ego's demands.

Theological differences remain decisive. Buddhism does not posit a returning soul or a personal deity. Yet from the standpoint of anthropology of consciousness, both traditions identify ego-dissolution as the threshold of ultimate peace. What Islam expresses through relational language, Buddhism articulates through analytical negation.

A parallel structure appears in Hinduism, particularly in the Sanskrit text of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Here, ego-transcendence is articulated not through negation, but through devotion (*bhakti*). Krishna exhorts Arjuna:

"Abandon all forms of ego-centered duty and take refuge in Me alone; I will liberate you from all bondage—do not grieve."
(Bhagavad Gītā 18.66)

The verse calls for the relinquishment of self-referential identity rooted in social roles, moral calculations, and personal merit. Liberation (*moksha*) is promised not through self-assertion, but through surrender.

Elsewhere, the Gītā describes the liberated state as follows:

"One who has become Brahman-realized is serene in spirit; he neither grieves nor desires."
(*brahma-bhūtaḥ prasannātmā na śocati na kāṅkṣati*, Bhagavad Gītā 18.54)

The term *prasannātmā* denotes a clarity and tranquility of the inner self that closely parallels the Qur'anic *muṭma'innah*. In bhakti, ego does not vanish through philosophical deconstruction, but through love that renders self-assertion unnecessary.

Viewed through an anthropological lens, these textual traditions converge on a single experiential horizon: the quieting, surrendering, or dissolving of ego as the precondition for ultimate fulfillment. The Qur'an frames this horizon as return and intimacy with God; Buddhism as cessation of craving and self-illusion; Hindu bhakti as union through devotion. The metaphysical grammars differ, but the experiential structure remains recognizable.

From this perspective, *jannatī* in Sūrat al-Fajr need not be understood as a sensory paradise comparable to the richly described *jannāt* of other Qur'anic passages. Rather, it may be read as a symbol for the consummate state of human existence—one in which ego no longer mediates experience and proximity to the Ultimate is no longer obstructed. Like nirvana and moksha, it denotes not a destination in space, but a transformation in being.

Such a reading does not negate doctrinal distinctions, nor does it collapse religions into one another. Instead, it affirms that sacred texts, across cultures, preserve a shared anthropological insight: that the deepest human suffering arises from the tyranny of the ego, and that the highest peace emerges when that tyranny ends. In this sense, *nafs al-muṭma'innah*, *anattā*, and *bhakti* represent different textual responses to the same existential question—how the human self may finally come to rest.